

The Female of the Species

BY ERICA JOHNSON DEBELJAK

A strange woman came to me early this morning. I think she must have appeared at around six in the morning: just about an hour before the alarm clock was set to ring and some time after the September sun had begun to penetrate the pale white blinds on my bedroom window. Come to think of it, it must have been after six, because I remember that the morning train that goes by our house on the hour and half-hour had already rumbled past. The mattress had swayed slightly beneath my body and awakened me with a vague sense of alarm, as if an explosion had detonated somewhere in the distance. I calmed myself by resting a hand on the still form of my husband lying next to me and watching the cords on the blinds swing gently back and forth, back and forth.

And then I must have drifted off to sleep again.

I woke a short time later with the sensation that somebody was watching me. And sure enough, there she was: a dark, cloaked, feminine figure standing motionless in the doorway. She looked rather romantic standing there, leaning gracefully against the doorframe. She silently surveyed the bedroom, her dark eyes taking in the broad white bed, the man and the woman sleeping there. As I watched her through half-shut eyelids, her black silhouette seemed to assume the blurred form of a woman from a distant century, the shape of her torso distorted slightly by what might have been a corset and a bustle. She looked so dark in the white frame of the doorway that she could have

been a nun in a habit reclining against an arch in a cloistered courtyard. Or a lady in mourning, resting against a column in a ballroom, observing the revelry, but not allowed, because of her widowed state, to dance.

And then she moved. The strange figure moved. Not only did she move, but she spoke to me. First she lifted a waxy finger up to her veil in a gesture as if to silence me—though I had made no noise. I had yet to even fully open my eyes. And then with the one hand before her curtained face, she lifted the other one and beckoned to me. A motion of her hand and a whispered word:

“Come,” she said: “Come.”

I obeyed. I don’t know why. Maybe I was afraid that if she remained there in the doorway, she would waken my husband. Or perhaps I was simply curious. Whatever my reasons, I rose from the bed wearing only my thin cotton nightgown. I turned to cover my husband with the duvet, letting my hand graze briefly against his back. I pressed down the button on the alarm clock to keep it from ringing at seven o’clock and then, pausing to reconsider, pulled the button back up again before crossing the cool planks of the floor toward a figure I half expected to vanish once I reached the doorway.

I could make out virtually nothing of her features: only her two white hands and a strip of eyes between head cover and veil. As I came towards her, she reached one hand out from the abundant folds of black and I met it with my own. I was surprised at that moment by the warmth of her skin. It seemed so real to me. So alive.

“Come,” she repeated softly, and guided me through the hallway toward the children’s room. Walking behind her, I observed how

cautiously she maneuvered through the narrow corridor, taking special care not to bump her draped bulk against the doorframe or against the chair that always stood by the bathroom covered in yesterday's discarded garments.

She led me into the children's bedroom, and we stood, she and I, side by side, for what seemed like a very long time, looking down at my two sleeping daughters. Two girls, six and nine, sharing one bed, though they each have their own. What is it about sleeping children? They're so lovely. Though really, lovely is hardly an adequate word to describe them. Heart-wrenching. Otherworldly. Evocative. I don't know. There may be no word equal to the task. I used to study my husband's eyelids as he slept, trying to figure out what the difference was: why watching the girls sleep made the breath catch in my throat, and watching him sleep just made me feel love of the ordinary kind. Is it something as simple as the age of the skin that covers the eyes? The physical quality of the lids? The smoothness? The tiny blue veins snaking their way through the papery membrane? The power of mother-love has always struck me as something mysterious and overwhelming. I have taught literature at the neighborhood high school for over a decade now and I once assumed that I would end up writing something myself. But I lost any desire for literary creation once I had the girls. Not because they were too troublesome or time-consuming, but simply because they were too perfect. What phrase, what series of words could ever compare to such everyday perfection?

The murmur of fabric reminded me of the presence of the veiled woman beside me.

"Do you have children?" I asked absently, still thinking of my own.

"I did," came the abbreviated reply.

"Ah." I articulated the meaningless syllable with a tone of feminine understanding, though I understood little of such loss and had wearied at times of trying. My husband is a Balkan studies scholar at the university, and I have heard my fair share of tragic stories: children lost to war, families broken up by emigration, grandparents spending their final years in a refugee camp. We lived in Zagreb for a year after our first daughter was born and I remember one day receiving a visit from an Albanian émigré writer who had heard about my husband's work. It was a brilliant sunny day and he sat on a yellow couch in our living room, a blanket of pastel colored elephants and giraffes hanging incongruously on the back of the couch behind him. I had just had my first baby, while this man, sitting in our living room, had just been released from the jail cell in Tirana where he had spent the last eight years of his life. He recounted to my husband how his father had been killed by the former regime (suicided he called it), how his mother had died in prison, how his young wife had been made to divorce him, she and their only child sent into exile. He sat on the yellow couch and told this story, lifting his hands up to his face in a frequent gesture as if he were waving away a persistent fly. As I listened to him, I looked down just as frequently into the sleeping face of my baby, and each time I felt the most magnificent surge of joy. I was struck at that moment how such extremes of circumstances and emotions—this man's misery and my happiness—could occupy the same world, let alone the same sun-filled room.

So I did not ask the woman why she possessed her children only in the past tense. I knew so little about her as it was and this seemed

a treacherous place to begin our acquaintance. I knew only that she was here somehow. And that she wore traditional Muslim dress. But other than that: nothing. I didn't even know, for example, if it was her habit to drink coffee in the morning or not.

"Do you drink coffee in the morning?" I asked her as we slipped quietly out of the girls' room and into the hallway.

Her eyes glittered above the veil. I couldn't tell whether it was from tears or from amusement at the sheer banality of the question asked of her in these circumstances or from something else altogether. It is often said that the eyes are the windows to the soul, but when the rest of the face is covered, they betray remarkably little. If they are windows, they are better for seeing out of than for seeing into.

"Yes, sometimes," she answered. "Though we used to take coffee in the afternoon, and tea in the morning."

"Well, let's have a cup of coffee now," I suggested. "I can't wake up properly without it."

And then we walked down the staircase together, side by side, hand in hand, like two sisters.

"But you'll have to take that off, won't you?" I nodded toward the veil.

"My *niqaab*?" she raised her free hand to her covered face, and the foreign word floated out from behind the opaque fabric, lingering for a while in the quiet morning air.

"You can't drink with it on, can you? Anyhow," I said to reassure her, "we're all women here. My husband sleeps like the dead."

"Some clerics say that we shouldn't show our faces to any non-believers, not even to other women, though I..." but her voice was momentarily drowned out by the sound of the six-thirty commuter

train going past. At that instant, we were walking by the large floor-length mirror in the downstairs front hall. I caught a glimpse of the two of us in the mirror: she covered head-to-toe in black, me in a billowing white nightgown. The glass in the mirror shuddered and our positive-negative images wavered in it. I froze for a second, bracing myself for something, though I wasn't sure what.

"It's nothing," she smiled. Now it was she reassuring me.

I could see her smile because at the bottom of the stairs she had released my hand for a moment and undone the sides of her veil and pushed back her headscarf. I was surprised to see that her hair was even shorter than mine, cut severely, in an almost monastic way. She was otherwise very pretty: pronounced cheek bones, dark red lips that went down slightly at the corners even when she smiled. She looked several years younger than me, or perhaps was only better preserved. But the sight of her face, after the impenetrable blackness of the veil, was like an epiphany. It was as if a spotlight had suddenly illuminated the scenery on a darkened stage.

I made coffee and we sat together at the kitchen table to drink it. I took one sugar; she took three. "So what do you call this?" I touched the headscarf that had fallen down around her neck and shoulders.

"*Khimar*. If you are not wearing a veil, it can be pulled across to cover your face when an unknown man enters or," she added with what seemed like a playful jab at me, "a non-believing woman." She demonstrated by pulling it up over her face and presenting me once again with the riddle of her eyes.

"*Khimar*," I repeated. And she unraveled the piece of fabric and laid it on the table next to the veil.

"And the dress..."

"...is called *abaya*. If it were not so warm today, I would also be wearing a long cotton overcoat, a *jilbab*."

"*Khimar, abaya, jilbab...*" I repeated. Scarf, dress, overcoat. We were like two foreigners in a train compartment, teaching each other ordinary words for ordinary objects to pass the time. "*Kimar, abaya, jilbab...*"

"And when do girls start wearing this?" I asked, fingering the crisp black veil.

"When they begin to bleed, or when they get their first hair," she gestured vaguely, "down there. It is called drawing the *khimar* over the face, lifting the screen."

I thought of my own nine-year old sleeping upstairs. By that measure, she wouldn't have too many years left.

"But I didn't start wearing it until later. Until after the children..."

"...were born." I finished her sentence.

"...were killed." She gave it another ending.

"Ah." again that useless syllable. I still didn't want to hear her story. I preferred the harmless exchange of feminine vocabulary. I've known women who've lost children. I've listened to their stories. I've nodded my head in quiet sympathy. I met one woman at a teachers' conference whose thirteen-year-old girl had died the summer before in a car accident. She carried a picture of her dead daughter around with her and showed it to anyone willing to contemplate that shining young face poised forever on the brink of womanhood. I knew another woman whose first child died of crib death at eight months. And a friend of my sister's who carried a dead baby inside her womb

for the last month of her pregnancy, knowing all the while that the creature nurtured inside of her had become a cold and monstrous thing. The truth is, that if we really followed our instincts when we met such a person, we would not quietly listen to their stories. We would not murmur softly, letting out “ahs” and “ohs,” the balm of our hypocrisy.

No. We would not.

If we followed our true impulses, we would wave amulets before their faces. Give them the evil eye. Cast them out. For they embody precisely what we fear most.

But the woman told me her story anyway and I said no curses, waved no amulets in her face. I just stared into the blackness of the veil she had placed on the table and, working the dense material between my fingers, absorbed what I could of the recounted events. It had happened in one of those places that one hears so much about these days: Grozny or Gaza or Falluja. A bomb struck her cinderblock apartment building at exactly seven o'clock in the morning and the whole structure collapsed in on itself. She remembered the hour because she was already up and about, making tea and preparing the boys' satchels for school. She had let her two boys, seven and ten years old, sleep a little longer that morning in their shared bed—the only bed. She couldn't help but think that if she had woken them (the eternal if, if, ifs of mother-love), they might have survived as she herself had, because the kitchen was on the other side of the apartment from where the blast hit. But she hadn't woken them. She had let them sleep that morning.

She told me that it took several hours to get them out. And when there were finally pulled from the rubble, they appeared

completely unharmed. "The sun was high and hot when they were finally laid down next to each other on the pavement outside," she told me. "I remember noticing how the shadow of their eyelashes fell upon their white cheeks, like the shadow of a sun dial in an empty square. How beautiful they looked. As if they were still sleeping."

Yes, sleeping children are lovely, aren't they? Though lovely may not be a sufficient word to describe that particular quality. There may, in fact, be no such word.

In the lull that followed the telling of her story, I was seized by a sudden desire. I wouldn't be able to say precisely what drove me at that moment. Whether it was the wish to erase her words somehow, or to actually change places with her, lend her some of the comfort of my existence. Or simply to move, to react, to do something. But now it was me who said: "Come," and pulled her into the hallway and in front of the great mirror. I tugged my white nightgown over my head and stood naked before her.

"We're the same, you and I. Like sisters. Look at our hair and our bodies. These black and white clothes; it's just an accident of fate or birth or the place where we happened to grow up. It's nothing more than that. It's *only* that," I said eagerly.

"Take your dress off. Take off your *abaya*," I said.

I reached over to her and pulled her dress over her head. She stood stock-still, stiff though not resisting.

"See. Look at us. Look at our bodies. Our hips. Our breasts. We're the same," I insisted.

And it was true that both of us occupied that median point in life when the seductive curves of our past youth could be discerned in the

very same shapes that held the wilting forms of the old women we would one day become. Our breasts, still nice enough, hung a bit lower than they once did. The skin around the nipples was slightly imploded by the years of suckling infants tugging at them.

But I could not see her stomach. I could not see the stretch marks on the skin that had become swollen and distended in just the same way as mine had, having first made room for the two babies that had grown inside of us and then deflating after the new lives had been expelled. I could not see her stomach because, wrapped tightly beneath her waist, was a belt of explosives: the complicated system of buckles and ties; the row of slender, discreet pockets; the two pull cords hanging in front of the hips where they could be quickly and easily reached. It was this contraption strapped to her body that had given her dark silhouette in the bedroom door that slightly old-fashioned form—the faint outline of a bustle bulging out below her waist. It was this hidden presence under her robes that had caused her to walk with such exaggerated caution.

“Take that off too,” I pointed at it.

I continued to speak as she complied with my demand, untying and unbuckling the cumbersome thing.

“Now I know why you came to me, why I dreamed you,” I said.

“You didn’t dream me,” she responded between clenched teeth, showing an unexpected flash of fury, angry that I—a woman like her, a non-believing woman at that—insisted on seeing her as nothing more than a dream, nothing more than a figment.

“I saw you, or one of your kind, on television last night, just before I went to bed,” I continued, ignoring her anger. “There was a

long documentary program about the massacre at that elementary school. At school number one," though I hated that they called it that, as if there would inevitably follow school number two and three and four. "You were there on the video. You were standing in the doorway of the gymnasium, just as you stood upstairs in my bedroom. You were looking out calmly over the room filled with hostages, over all the children huddled there. You stood in the doorway at that school in the very same pose you had when you came to me this morning: motionless, serene, waiting."

She at last succeeded in unstrapping the belt and she knelt down and laid it on the floor between us. And then we stood, side by side, studying each other in the mirror.

"You don't have a red mark on your belly," I observed.

"What do you mean?"

"Like the spider. The black widow. That's what they call you. The lethal female of the species has a red hourglass-shaped mark on her abdomen."

"I'm not a spider," she said.

"There was a little girl on the television show last night. A little schoolgirl, seven or eight-years-old. A survivor of the tragedy, surprisingly self-possessed. She spoke clearly and matter-of-factly about the whole ordeal. Children are quite remarkable that way, don't you think? How they live through such a thing, and somehow remain so artless, so trusting—somehow remain children. The only sign of delusion or trauma in this girl could be sensed when she spoke of her brother who had not made it out of the school. She said with absolute certainty that he was just waiting until it was safe to come home.

That he was waiting in the city, or under a bridge somewhere, as if it were all a bizarre fairytale."

I paused to catch my breath. I had been speaking so fast.

"She also said something about you."

The woman, bereft now of her black drapery, her veil, the grief she had strapped round her body, seemed to take an interest in what the little girl had to say about her. The anger she had shown before had all but dissipated and, as if on cue, we both kneeled down together and sat on our haunches before the mirror, the belt of explosives between us.

"What did she say?" she asked.

"She said you were her friend."

"Her friend?" She seemed genuinely puzzled by this.

"Yes, her friend," I replied. "The interviewer was also surprised by this remark and asked the girl to repeat it. And she did. Quite emphatically. She said you were her friend. She said you gave her water on the second day of the siege."

"Oh," the woman said quietly. "Water. Yes. I did give her water."

And we looked into each other's eyes for a long moment, both of us recognizing the truth of the matter. For we had both given water to other women's children. I had done it countless times during family visits or when my girls had their little friends over to play. I had stood at the sink in the very kitchen where I had just made coffee. I had pulled a plastic cup from the cupboard, filled it with cool water from the tap and passed it to some child or another who had gulped it down with an absent look in his or her open, unseeing eyes. Each occasion contained the same familiar set of ingredients: the muscles of

the smooth young throat working convulsively up and down, the sharp expulsion of air when the cup was emptied, the automatic return of the cup to the woman at the sink, and the just as automatic return of the child to play, to growing, to life.

Yes, we had both given water to other women's children, and we both knew that it was an entirely different thing than giving water to one's own.

"If we are the same," she said and she pushed the belt of explosives toward me, "why don't you put this on?"

"The same," I repeated and laid a tentative finger on the belt. It felt as I had known it would. Hot and cold to the touch at the same time. Greasy, like some filthy killing thing, but also clean and powerful and pure. This belt endowed its wearer with the power over life and death, the power to choose the timing of death's arrival, the power of a god who grants life and then takes it away at will. Though such power, without a doubt, would have been more precious to this woman had she possessed it on another morning, rather than on this one. I started to lift the belt, to feel its weight in my hands.

"It's heavy," I said.

"Yes, it is," she said softly, "it feels even heavier when you wear it around your waist."

She repeated the instruction: "Put it on."

Again I hesitated. I slowly pulled it up and held it round my naked waist, testing it, and for some reason recalling the backaches that used to plague me during the last months of pregnancy. How I would awaken with the sensation that the burden carried in front of me had turned my lower back to molten liquid.

But having lifted the belt to my waist, I also felt something small and cold and metallic against my skin, something affixed to its interior side that I hadn't noticed before. I lowered the belt to look for the source of the sensation and realized, with a pang of regret and pity, that the female of the species never, not even when wearing this dreadful belt, exercises sole power over life and death. For there was another fuse in addition to the pull cords in the front. There was a cell phone wired to the inside of the belt, a cell phone that almost certainly allowed for remote detonation.

I looked at the tiny phone. The digital clock on it displayed the hour of 6:59. One more minute, I thought, one more minute. As the three digits switched to the next set of numbers, I felt the floor began to shift sickeningly beneath me. I looked one last time into the woman's exposed face: her warm lips, her dark shining eyes, her shorn hair so much like my own.

"Sisters," she whispered, the corners of her mouth drifting downward into a sad smile. And then perhaps noting the fear in my eyes, she added: "It's nothing..." but her voice was swallowed up by the sound of the 7:00 commuter train screaming past.

I leapt to my feet and ran upstairs.

I ran past the bedroom that contained my husband's motionless body, the alarm clock sounding a relentless mechanized wail beside him.

I ran down the hallway to wake my children from their lovely living slumber. ◻